

People in MTV docusoaps are more ideal than real

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More midriff, cleavage and muscle is seen in MTV's popular television docusoaps such as *The Real World*, *Jersey Shore* or *Laguna Beach* than in the average American household. Semi-naked brawny Adonises and even more scantily clad thin women strut around on screen simply to grab the audience's attention. In the process, they present a warped view to young viewers about how they should look. Such docusoaps are definitely more ideal than real, say Mark Flynn of the Coastal Carolina University and Sung-Yeon Park of Bowling Green State University in the US. The findings, which scrutinize the stars in reality programs, are published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

The study is among the first to closely scrutinize how body ideals are depicted on US [reality television](#). A content analysis of 299 episodes were done of the popular MTV docusoaps *Jersey Shore*, *Laguna Beach*, *The Real World*, *The Hills* and *Newport Harbor*, aired between 2004 and 2011. Each reality star's body type and clothing were noted, as well as how often they showed some flesh on camera.

Such docusoaps have a huge following among young people, who are in general the most susceptible group to develop body image disturbances and eating disorders in the U.S. In this television genre, real people portray themselves and are filmed seemingly unscripted as they live out and experience events. Research has shown that regular viewers of reality television perceive the heavily edited programming to be highly realistic.

The implicit assumption about these programs is that anyone can be on them, and that reality stars are just "normal people." Not so, report Flynn and his colleagues, after finding that the body types featured are more ideal than real. In fact, the percentage of lean bodies seen in docusoaps is almost the reverse of what is really happening in the US general population. Two in every three Americans are either overweight or obese, while not one docusoap included in the study's sample features someone obese. Instead, two-thirds of the women and three-quarters of the men in them have very little [body](#) fat. Half of all participants are either curvaceously thin or muscularly lean, depending on their gender.

Docusoaps were also found to be "unreal" in how often the reality stars - and especially those blessed with an ideal [body type](#) - strut around partially or fully naked on screen. Nine out of ten women's bodies are at least minimally exposed, and close to one-third are partially or fully undressed. Almost half of the men appear on screen either partially or fully nude.

Flynn says there is a definite shift away from the general acceptance of overweight men on television. When it comes to looks, the bar is now being lifted even higher for men than it is for women.

"Although these shows are labelled as reality-based, the bodies displayed in them are highly idealized," says Flynn, who believes that long-term exposure to MTV docusoaps may have as much, if not greater, impact on the self-objectification of men as it does on women.

More information: Flynn M. A. et al. (2015). Anything but Real: Body Idealization and Objectification of MTV Docusoap Characters, *Sex Roles*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-015-0464-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0464-2)

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